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Under the Spell of Metaphors: Investigating the Effects of Conduit and Container Metaphors on Museum Experience

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Key words: metaphor, conduit, container, transmission, museum architecture, museum object, museum experience.

Abstract

In 1979, Michael Reddy investigated the effects that ‘conduit’ metaphors have on human communication. His research illustrates that people tend to conceptualize feelings, thoughts or ideas as substances ‘transmitted’ from one agent to another through a ‘conduit’, or as loosely ‘contained’ in ambient spaces. Following a cognitive-linguistic approach, this article investigates the effects that ‘conduit’ and ‘container’ metaphors have on visitors’ experience in museums; it presupposes that our conceptual system is metaphorical in nature and that language expresses the metaphors we use to think and act in everyday life.

This article acknowledges that conduit and container metaphors shape museum communication practices, and sets out to identify their effects on museum objects and

museum architecture— which are two essential material conditions that shape visitors' experience. To do so, this article traces expressions of transmission metaphors in professional museum discourses—particularly that of international museum organizations— and identifies their effects on museum practice. It draws attention to the conflicts that these metaphors trigger in museum debates. Furthermore, it highlights the possibility of enhancing their positive effects and of weakening their negative ones, by building new metaphorical frames for museum theory and practice.

Introduction: The Discursive Wagons of Lagado [H1]

(Insert figure 1 about here)

In Jonathan Swift's novel *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. By Lemuel Gulliver* (commonly known as *Gulliver's Travels*), Gulliver visits the Academy of Lagado in the island of Balnibarbi. There, he witnesses a series of awkward experiments and surveys (Swift 1894, 221-231). One of them concerns the abolition of the discursive qualities of communication, and the substitution of writing and speaking with the storing and exhibiting of objects.

Since words are only names for *Things*, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such *Things* as were necessary to express a particular business they are to discourse on. (Swift 1894, 229)

In the Academy of Lagado, thoughts are carried in portable containers and debates transform into co-curated exhibitions. These experimental communication practices, built on the simple rule that words are only names of things, aim to establish a universal language, understood and adopted “...by all civilized nations, whose goods and utensils are generally of the same kind...” (Swift 1894, 231).

The novel consists of allegorical narratives which satirizes English governance and customs of the eighteenth century; the Lagado Science Academy is considered a parody of the Royal Society of London which was established in 1660s to “recognize, promote, and support excellence in science” (The Royal Society 2013). The Society was known for, among other things, its efforts to discourage the use of metaphors in scientific discourse, in descriptions of experiments and formulation of theories (Sprat, Cope, and Jones 1958, 113). Swift is, perhaps, commenting on the Society’s proscriptions against metaphors by constructing a communication device that is primarily metaphorical, as it uses tangible objects to communicate intangible concepts.

By carrying around reified messages and by exhibiting them in sequence, Swift showcases our tendency to conceptualize language as a ‘conduit’ or ‘container’ of thoughts, and to understand human communication as a set of unidirectional transmissions that follow one another from utterer to listener. The successful operation of Swift’s communication device presupposes that each ‘word’ stands for the same thing for all the participants of discussion; as such this passage in the novel also highlights the ability of transmission metaphors to support— or to impede— human communication, often invisibly.

Transmission metaphors in museum discourse and practice

Metaphors of ‘transmission’ have been frequently employed to conceptualize and discuss human communication inside and outside the museum context. Michael Reddy was the first to highlight their presence in everyday language and their scientific and social implications. Through his research, he illustrates that people tend to conceptualize feelings, thoughts or ideas as substances ‘transmitted’ from one agent to another either through a ‘conduit’, or as loosely ‘contained’ in texts, objects or spaces (Reddy 1979, 284-324). Transmission metaphors are fully active when we discuss monuments, archaeological sites and museum objects as ‘containers’ of intrinsic or extrinsic values, or when we talk about libraries, archives and museums as ‘conduits’ that transfer cultural information from one generation to another. This article traces expressions of conduit and container metaphors in museum discourses and identifies their effects on museum practice. It showcases that transmission metaphors shape visitors’ experience in museums, primarily by shaping the two material conditions that support it: museum objects and museum architecture.

The Conduit Metaphor and its Frameworks [H1]

Reddy’s investigation of conduit metaphors’ effects on communication models and practices is presented in the collective volume *Thought and Metaphor* (Ortony 1979). This selection of essays has inspired a turn in linguistic theories and triggered a new research perspective. This new perspective advocates that “the locus of metaphor is thought, not language” and that everyday practices “reflect our metaphorical understanding of experience” (Lakoff 1993, 203-204). There are four key points that

shape theories on conceptual metaphors, summarized by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson as:

First, the locus of metaphor is in concepts not words. Second, metaphor is, in general, not based on similarity... it is typically based on cross-domain correlations in our experience... Third, even our deepest and most abiding concepts— time, events, causation, morality, and mind itself— are understood and reasoned about via multiple metaphors... Fourth, the system of conceptual metaphors is not arbitrary or just historically contingent; rather, it is shaped to a significant extent by the common nature of our bodies and the shared ways that we all function in the everyday world. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p.244-5)

The term ‘conceptual’ promotes metaphors from merely figures of speech to cognitive frameworks or scaffoldings, which establish correlations between domains of thought and domains of experience. For example, ‘heritage’ metaphors -used to discuss cultural policies- allow us to think of the domain of culture in terms of another domain, of inherited property. When cognitive linguists speak of the ways that conceptual metaphors are expressed in language (in words, phrases, or sentences), they use the term ‘*metaphorical expression*’, referring to “the surface realization of such cross-domain mappings” (Lakoff 1993, 203). This convention is adopted for this article as well.

Lakoff suggests that this turn in linguistics is triggered by Reddy’s investigation of conduit metaphors. In his article called *The Conduit Metaphor— A Case of Frame*

Conflict in Our Language about Language (Reddy 1979), Reddy argues that we tend to conceptualize and therefore discuss our thoughts, feelings or ideas as substances contained in words and transmitted from one agent to another through a conduit (e.g. we ‘share’ our feelings with someone, we ‘get through’ to others, we ‘transfer’, or ‘stream’ thoughts). This conceptual framework, named “the ‘major framework’ of the conduit metaphor” by Reddy (Reddy 1979, 290), is expressed in four ways:

(1) language functions like a conduit, transferring thoughts bodily from one person to another; (2) in writing and speaking, people insert their thoughts or feelings in the words; (3) words accomplish the transfer by containing the thoughts or feelings and conveying them to others; and (4) in listening or reading, people extract the thoughts and feelings once again from the words (Reddy 1979, 290)

A side-effect of using conduit metaphors is that people also conceptualize thoughts or ideas as substances transmitted into spaces external to utterers, waiting for listeners to pick them up (e.g. people ‘spread’ news, they ‘put’ their thoughts on paper, places are ‘full of’ memories). Therefore, people conceptualize texts, and by extension objects or spaces, as tangible ‘containers’ of the intangible qualities which— they think— they infuse in them. Reddy calls this second framework “the minor framework” of the conduit metaphor (Reddy 1979, 290). He suggests that the minor framework is a by-product of conduit metaphor, and has three key expressions:

(1) thoughts and feelings are ejected by speaking or writing into an external

‘idea space’; (2) thoughts and feelings are reified in this external space, so that they exist independent of any need for living human beings to think or feel them; (3) these reified thoughts and feelings may, or may not, find their way back into the heads of humans. (Reddy 1979, 291)

Although both frameworks reify thoughts and feelings, Reddy suggests that they are often incompatible; the major framework speaks of feelings and thoughts as contained in words but directly transmitted from one agent to another. The minor framework instead speaks of feelings and thoughts as transmitted and contained in objects or spaces. The two frameworks are incompatible because they simultaneously use two distinct devices of transmission, and therefore two metaphors, that of ‘conduit’ and of ‘container’.

A conduit’s primary ability is to transfer its loads or contents through itself. Transmission is an intrinsic ability of conduits and it is often linear and continuous. Conduits are passively involved in the act of transmission; this passivity often renders them invisible.

Containers also transfer their contents, but their primary ability is to hold them and shape them. This transfer implies movement on the part of the container and it is therefore broken into subsequent stages. While both conduit and container devices are essential mediators, containers call attention to themselves by actively interrupting transmission, whereas conduits work as invisible mediums that guarantee flow.

It so often happens that we employ more than one metaphor to construct a conceptual framework. Lakoff and Johnson suggest that “The reason we need two metaphors is

because there is no one metaphor that will do the job” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 95). Each metaphor focuses on aspects of the domain that the other ignores. It is when distinct metaphors shape the same aspects of a domain inconsistently that conflicts may arise. By extension, I suggest that conduit metaphors render mediums invisible and allow us to focus on the content transmitted and container metaphors render the medium indispensable and bring attention on the medium of transmission . This analysis helps us think of the two metaphors not as static devices but as dynamic processes (Schön 1979, 254). This is crucial when investigating how these metaphors affect the visitor experience in museums.

From Cognitive Linguistics to Museum Discourse and Practice [H2]

Philosophers, media theorists, and museum professionals have conceptualized museums as arcs, wagons, banks or mausoleums -as mobile or static containers that transfer their contents from one time or place to another (Allan and Tradescant 1964; Proust 1992; Valery 1960; Adorno 1983). Metaphorical expressions are ubiquitous in discourses about museums; they verify the presence of metaphors employed to criticize popular museum practices and to inspire new ones. Duncan Cameron explores the metaphors of museum-as-temple and museum-as-forum in order to synthesize new roles for public museums (Duncan 1971). Judith Mastai instead envisions museums as laboratories where people perform their various identities (Graham Janna & Yasin Shadya 1994). Stephen E. Weil shows that metaphors shape our expectations of museums and museum communication strategies (Weil 1995, Weil 2012).

Transmission metaphors are explicitly and implicitly present in popular debates about the

museum. Reddy refers to their effects when he highlights that, if what the minor framework suggests is true, “then naturally we of the modern period are preserving our cultural heritage better than any other age, because we have more books, films, tapes, and so on, stored in more and bigger libraries”(Reddy 1979, 309). Reddy’s minor framework suggests that cultural information is transmitted and contained in sets of exhibits, and that this information waits patiently to be extracted. In this conceptual model, the responsibility for producing cultural messages lies on cultural institutions, and the responsibility for extracting them lies on the institutions’ visitors. Hence, transmission metaphors make communication seem like an easy or automatic process between active speakers and passive listeners. This presupposition has long haunted museum communication practices.

Those museum theorists and practitioners who wish to upgrade visitors from passive recipients to active participants have criticized these unidirectional communication models. For example, in her book *Museums and their Visitors*, Eilean Greenhill Hooper explores the disadvantages of communication models that use transmission metaphors (Hooper-Greenhill 2012, 520), and instead seeks less linear-ones that can interrupt museum monologues. Alternative models either invite visitors to participate in curatorial processes (Hooper-Greenhill 1994, 35-53) or welcome research on visitors’ identities and experience as the essential base for exhibition design (Falk & Dierking 2013). While the results of these investigations are easily translated into museum practices, a cognitive-linguistics approach enables us to see beyond communication models, and to demonstrate that transmission metaphors shape museum objects and museum architecture.

In the remainder of this article, I close-read expressions of transmission metaphors in official museum discourse and discuss their effects on museum practice. I first trace their expressions in UNESCO's conventions, charters and documents. This is done in order to showcase how conduit and container metaphors shape conceptualizations of tangible and intangible heritage, and directly influence national and international policies. I then look for expressions of the two metaphorical frameworks in the International Council of Museums (ICOM)'s definitions. It appears that the two frameworks shape at least two different kinds of museum object, of exhibition and of museum architecture. This can trigger conflicts.

Under the Spell of Transmission Metaphors [H1]

When Reddy discusses the social implications of conduit metaphors, he suggests that language (like a magician) uses metaphor as a 'hypnotic spell' upon its utterers (Reddy, 1979, 308). The article suggests that conduit and container metaphors *cast a spell* on visitors' experience by shaping the tangible conditions of museum visit. Educational institutions founded on the acquisition and investigation of cultural artifacts— such as libraries, archives and, in our case, museums— set as a priority treasuring, conserving and showcasing their learning mediums. Both conduit and container metaphors influence the museum experience, but because of container metaphors' focus on the medium, museums make more explicit use of them in their discourse.

The Making of Cultural Heritage [H2]

Transmission metaphors shape our understanding of museum objects even before those objects enter museums. By shaping our concept of culture as a form of 'inherited public

property’, transmission metaphors guide our acquisition preferences and our preservation priorities. Notions of heritage and property are tightly-linked to the birth of the public museum. Marilena Vecco suggests that during the emergence of public museums, cultural heritage mainly consisted of goods bequeathed to recently-established democratic regimes by the fallen kingships (Vecco 2010, 32). Heritage metaphors embrace the incompatible properties of conduit and container frameworks. They help us conceptualize the process of transmission in time –as a form of inheritance- and the objects of transmission –as a form of property-.

The political will to define culture as inherited property is recorded in *UNESCO’s Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* in 1954. This official definition is triggered by an urgent demand to protect material culture from the destructive effects of the two, then-recent, world wars and to confirm the status of its ownership (Toman 1996).

Article 1. Definition of cultural property

For the purposes of the present Convention, the term ‘cultural property’ shall cover, irrespective of origin or ownership:

(a) movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological sites; groups of buildings which, as a whole, are of historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest; as well as scientific collections and important collections of books or archives

- or of reproductions of the property defined above;
 - (b) buildings whose main and effective purpose is to preserve or exhibit the movable cultural property defined in sub-paragraph...
 - (c) centers containing a large amount of cultural property as defined in sub-paragraphs (a) and (b), to be known as 'centers containing monuments'.
- (UNESCO 1954)

The need to look into the past and verify the origin and significance of this tangible inheritance forces the infusion of intangible qualities into it. Doing so invites expressions of transmission metaphors in these official documents. Reddy's minor framework is highly evident in the 1964 *Charter of Venice*, which declares that cultural heritage is 'imbued' with messages from the past.

Imbued with a message from the past, the historic monuments of generations of people remain to the present day as living witnesses of their age-old traditions. (ICOMOS 1964) [My emphasis]

Transmission metaphors start to shape official definitions when UNESCO turns to the protection of intangible heritage. According to Vecco, this happened in the midst of the twentieth century. Since then, culture's intangible elements are discussed fundamentally as 'bearers' or 'vehicles' of cultural memory and identity.

2000, Krakow: "Individual elements of this heritage are *bearers* of many values, which may change in time." (UNESCO 2003) [My emphasis]

2002, Paris: “2. “The “intangible cultural heritage”, as defined in paragraph 1 above, is manifested inter alia in the following domains: (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a *vehicle* of the intangible cultural heritage;” (UNESCO 2003) [My emphasis]

These definitions suggest that transmission metaphors permeate the way we think, discuss and manage culture. They also showcase that when attention falls on the medium, container metaphors shape our understanding of tangible heritage as a corpus of material elements imbued with past messages. By contrast, when attention falls on messages transferred through traditional handcrafts or performative practices, conduit metaphors shape intangible heritage as a moving ‘vehicle’ or ‘bearer’.

Cultural practices have transformative and erosive aspects that can alter or destroy artifacts (as well as generate new ones). Reddy’s minor framework tricks us into thinking that, by preserving artifacts, we preserve the craftsmanship that produced them or the history that carved them into their current form. By reifying the intangible, transmission metaphors favor the preservation of artifacts— and not of the practices that produced them. Heritage lists and museum collections confirm these assumptions: once registered and catalogued, archaeological sites, religious places and artists’ workshops and residences are turned into monuments or museums. Erosive rituals or practices are no longer hosted in them. Carefully conserved, tagged and framed, they occupy public space as indexed objects, signified by labels that give away their cultural meaning.

Transmission metaphors do not only shape a common conceptual frame that enables us to think and discuss culture, but they also actively shape the selection of elements that

constitute it.

Shaping Museum Experience: The Making of Museum Objects

Once inside museum premises, cultural artifacts are transformed into museum objects—the significant particles of exhibits. Tracing the expressions of transmission metaphors in the recently-published Encyclopedic Dictionary of Museology-EDM (ICOM & ICOFOM 2011) allows us to understand how a significant number of museum professionals conceptualize this transformation.

Through their work of acquisition, research, preservation and communication, museums can be presented as one of the major authorities in the ‘production’ of objects... A museum object is something, which is musealised... (ICOM & ICOFOM 2010, 61-64)¹

...Musealisation is the operation of trying to *extract*, physically or conceptually, something from its natural or cultural environment and *giving* it a museal status, transforming it into a musealium or ‘museum object’. (ICOM & ICOFOM 2010, 50) [my emphasis]

Once placed inside museums, elements of cultural heritage are transformed from artifacts of interaction to objects of contemplation. ‘Musealisation,’ the term used to describe this transformation, is defined as a context management process that ‘extracts’ cultural artifacts physically or conceptually from their current settings and ‘gives’ them a new status. This extraction allows museum professionals to ‘discard’ certain meanings or

connotations and ‘assign’ new ones to them. Hence, transmission metaphors make us think of museum objects either as containers of intrinsic cultural information, or as conduits of information which is transmitted from museum curators to museum visitors. The first proposition sees museum objects as sealed containers of cultural values that speak for themselves, while the second proposition sees museum objects as conduits of messages, the signs of a language museums employ to built their narratives. I suggest that the effects of both frameworks become evident especially in archaeological galleries or exhibitions, because their objects are often conceptualized either as evidence of historical events or as encodings of historical narratives.

The first approach, supported by Reddy’s minor framework or by container metaphors, suggests that objects ‘have’ intrinsic value, they are ‘invested’ with messages from the past, and that we ‘extract’ information from them. Container metaphors tend to shape our conceptualizations of rare, mysterious or unique objects, which may not be tightly or explicitly linked to institutional stories but hold a significant position in exhibitions. For example, Neolithic carved stone balls are fine-grained sandstones of Neolithic origin but of unknown use (see image2). Museum information provided for such objects is often minimum or explicitly interpretive.

Designs on stones [3-5] from tombs, monuments and houses probably had a special meaning. Such design was also used on pottery and other items [6,8-9], including some of these mysterious stone objects [10-15] which may have been used in rituals

(Text accompanying the *Mysterious stones* in National Museum of Scotland’s –NMS- in Early People’s Gallery).

By extension, it is archaeological research on these artifacts that showcases their conceptualization through transmission metaphors.

Maintenance of the material form of an object readily allows us to believe that it continues to represent the same things and therefore *holds* the same meanings (MacGregor 1999, p.258) [My emphasis]

There is so little hard fact to be *extracted* from the evidence available about the carved stone balls (Marshall 1976, p.63) [My emphasis]

Their characterization as *mysterious* and their position in distinct showcases announces these objects as remarkable examples of cultural containers, acquired and exhibited for the information that they ‘conceal’ but we are unable to ‘extract.

Finally, container conceptualizations of museum objects are also manifested in the ways museum objects are presented. Exhibited in isolation or in assemblages that classification systems dictate, such museum objects are the essential components of exhibitions with archival qualities, or, as Wolfgang Ernst suggests, “archi(ve)textures” (Ernst 2000, 17-34). Exhibitions born out of Victorian collections of curiosities, for example, often reflect these archival textures, simultaneously exhibiting Roman pottery, Japanese prints, animal taxidermies and geological specimens. One such example is the exhibition “Window on the World” hosted in NMS which covers the mezzanines that surround its Grant Gallery and spreads vertically from level zero to level three (see Image 3).

Insert figure 2 and 3 here

By contrast, conduit metaphors can impede us from seeing any inherent information or value in museum objects. Reddy's major framework relegates museum objects to the role of passive transmitters of institutional messages: cognitive tools in the service of institutional storytelling. For example:

In this case, the museum object— musealium or musealia— does not have any intrinsic reality...Objects can thus be used as signs, just like words in speech, when they are used in an exhibition... (ICOM & ICOFOM 2010, 62-63)

Such conceptualizations encourage us to see museum objects as essential encodings of curatorial narratives, temporary bearers of meanings that have been assembled in relation to their context Jaques Hainard is a famous advocate of this position.

The (museum) object is the truth of nothing. First multifunctional, polysemic then, it makes sense only within a context (Hainard 1984, p.189).²

These conduit-objects make their appearance in historical, archaeological or event-oriented exhibitions (*i.e.* exhibitions shaped by strong narratives). The Early People Gallery in NMS is one such exhibition. Divided into several parts, it consists of clusters of museum objects— which stand as significant phrases of archaeological narratives. These narratives communicate the endurance of certain cultural practices and social customs. But, as always happens when reading a text, messages are successfully

transmitted only when the utterer is able to ignore the individual signs and focus on their meaningful assemblages. Hence, as conduit metaphors bring attention to the message, museum objects become conduits of random meanings and escape our attention after a couple of minutes— the very minutes we need to figure out how the story goes.

The *Viking grave* showcased in NMS and depicted in image 4 is such an example. The showcase is a representation of a Viking grave excavated in Orkney. The typical museum information provided for objects -description of materials, shapes and forms, possible reference to similar objects, or information on the condition of human remains and causes of death- is missing. By contrast the text refers to activities that the deceased possibly had engaged in and demonstrates the role of these assemblages as essential encodings of the institutional narrative on burial practices.

A Viking grave

This is a pagan Viking grave, from a Viking and native cemetery in Orkney.

A man aged about 30, was buried in a large oval stone lined pit. He was dressed [10], and his various possessions were buried with him: farming tools [5,8]; everyday objects [4,6,7]; a set of bone gaming pieces [3]; a drinking horn [2]; and his warrior's gear [1]. The body was covered with planks taken from a boat, with their iron rivets still fixed to them. The grave was filled with sand. At some point the remains of an older woman were buried in the same grave.

(text accompanying the Viking Grave Showcase in NSM)

(Insert photo 4 about here)

Shaping Museum Experience: The Making of Museums

Museums, as architectural artifacts, are the last material conditions examined in this article that co-defines the museum experience. When museums are discussed as educational institutions, attention falls on the transmission of messages; in this case, conduit metaphors take the lead. When discussed as architectural spaces and hosts of collections, then container metaphors are more-frequently used. Expressions of transmission metaphors permeate the discourse of museum professionals and architects; their generative frameworks inspire architectural practices and shape the relationship of museum visitors with museum architecture and its contents.

In the EDM, museums and exhibitions are conceptualized, fundamentally, as containers shaped by their contents— and not the other way round.

The exhibition, understood as the *container* or the place where the *contents* are on display is characterized not by the architecture of this space but by the place itself (ICOM & ICOFOM 2011, 35) [my emphasis]

(Museum) architecture ...is the *envelope* around the collections, the staff and the public”(ICOM & ICOFOM 2011, 27) [my emphasis]

...

Expressions of container metaphors prevail in museum architectural discourse as well.

The 2013 issue of the *Architectural Review* magazine, in which Antonello Marotta and

al. present the main metaphors that, for them, have inspired museum design, verifies the previous proposition (Marotta, Jones, and Raphael 2013, 75-85). When the authors talk of the Pompidou Centre, they say:

As a *container*, the museum embraces the contradictions of modernity and is an eloquent and abstract structure, independent of its artistic contents.

(Marotta, Jones, and Raphael 2013, 80). [My emphasis]

Transmission metaphors also shape their thoughts on James Stirling's Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart:

It is an articulated *container* that,... directs circulation through a multilayered scheme, between inside and outside and between history and the city. (Marotta, Jones, and Raphael 2013, 80). [My emphasis]

The metaphor is used to discuss former-military bases and industrial premises which have been altered to accommodate contemporary museums:

These *containers* – contaminated, well-worn and tragic – have now been adapted to accommodate contemporary uses based on the principle of interaction between what's on display and the surrounding space. (Marotta, Jones, and Raphael 2013, 82). [My emphasis]

Similar expressions can also be traced in more extended architectural overviews and

museum typologies. For example, when Larry Shiner speaks about Tadao Ando's Pulitzer Foundation museum in St. Louis he says,

For the viewer, the space is not just a neutral *container* but thanks to its dimensions and the effect of the changing length of the strip of light, it generates an unusually integrated experience, a combined work of art and architecture (Shiner 2007). [My emphasis]

When Victoria Newhouse prologues her chapter on museums as environmental art she says

Every space has its own distinct identity that affects the *contents*: without a harmonious relationship between the two, museum architecture fails. Chapter 7 describes designs that restore the historic connection between *container and content* in uniquely contemporary ways. (Newhouse 1998, 11) [My emphasis]

The recurrence of these expressions shows that transmission metaphors, and especially container ones, are significant conceptual tools for the communication of museum architecture. They also support conceptualizations of museum experience as a visitor's encounter with a sequence of containers embedded one inside the other. The object nests in the context of the exhibition. The exhibition nests in the context of the museum. The museum nests in the several contexts of its urban or social settings. This 'Russian nesting doll' metaphorical analysis shapes the relationship of museum architecture with its contents and by extension the visitor's experience of them.

To extend the metaphor, a Russian nesting doll consists of playfully painted wooden hollow dolls, of sequential sizes, designed to nest inside one another. The core piece of the doll is a solid unit, whose discovery signifies the end of the game. The external surface of each hollow part of the doll reflects the shape of the core unit and its inner face remains plain and undecorated. These two qualities of the hollow parts —similar shape to the core and unadorned interior—allow us to focus on the core object while revealing it over the course of the game.

Container metaphors portray ideal museums similarly— as communication devices that reflect the significance of their contents, but whose interior facades are silent or neutral. Once their visitors enter, these museums are expected to disappear, or cast their light only on their contents. The next passage showcases that these qualities of transmission metaphors leak into architectural practice as well.

Transmission metaphors shape museum architecture explicitly and implicitly. The conduit or portable container metaphor inspires architectural forms that are less faithful to their surroundings and to their contents. These forms fit loosely in their urban context, and are always ready to depart. They are also perceived as silent or neutral. The portable Chanel pavilion by Zaha Hadid (Zaha Hadid Architects 2013), the Nomadic Museum by Shigeru Ban (Shigeru Ban Architects 2013), the Gallery for Goetz Collection of Contemporary Art in Munich by Josep Meier Scupin, Pierre de Meuron and Jacques Herzog (Herzog & De Meuron 2013), and Renzo Piano's National Centre for Science and Technology (RPBW 2013) are only few of the architectural examples conceptualized as

discreet, mobile containers. Hence, transmission metaphors inspire the architectural design of nomad-museums, museums that seem to temporarily engage with their surroundings and with their contents; that work as silent conduits.

Insert Images 5 and 6 about here

On the other hand, several museum projects designed and built over the past three decades provide plenty of evidence that architects conceptualize museums as grandiose containers as well; these museums are designed to act as discursive repositories that protect and advertise their contents. Coop Himmelblau's Groningen Museum (CoopHimme(l)blau 2013), Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum (Studio Daniel Libeskind 2013), or the Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim Museum (Gehry Technologies 2013) are a few examples of contemporary grandiose containers. These containers succeed in calling attention to themselves before they even introduce their contents. Such museums, mainly conceptualized as playful containers, are frequently accused of hiding museum objects and of speaking on their behalf, as is the case of Berlin's Jewish Museum.

In Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, a particularly noteworthy phenomenon can be observed that has grown more prevalent in the last few decades: the form, above all, determines the museum, more so than its *contents*. So it's not particularly surprising that the building as an *embodiment* of the memories of the Jewish History of Berlin –was already open in 1999, well before becoming an actual museum in the year 2000 with its own concept for a collection and an exhibition (Sachs 1999, 100). [My emphasis]

The Record of a Frame Conflict

Donald Schön suggests that “a multiplicity of conflicting stories about a situation makes it dramatically apparent that we are dealing not with ‘reality’ but with various ways of making sense of reality” (Schön 1979, 267). EDM’s article on *Museum Architecture* is a brief record of conflicts regarding the relationship of museum architecture with its contents, and its impact on visitors’ experience (ICOM & ICOFOM 2011, 27-52). In the article, museum architecture is sometimes described as the essential neutral fabric, the discreet “envelope” or conduit that accommodates collections (ICOM 2011, 27).

However, sometimes EDM describes the museum as a loquacious container that frequently neglects its duties, mistreats its contents and arrogantly absorbs all attention.

For example:

Concerning the development of the container rather than the content, the architectural design so far endeavored to showcasing itself more than serving the museum and its contents. (ICOM & ICOFOM 2011, 27-52)³

Or:

Whatever the intoxication, what does the bottle matter! (ICOM & ICOFOM 2011, 27-52)⁴

It often seems that museum directors or curators favor the discreet container that supports the uninterrupted engagement of visitors with its contents— one that works like

a conduit. Some architects find the static or grandiose container more inspiring, and thus they design museums that advertise the significance of their contents and draw attention to themselves. The conflict between museum architecture and museum objects has been addressed in several museum overviews and shapes most museum typologies (Moos 1999, 15-27; Newhouse 1998; Shiner 2007).

When two distinct metaphors shape the same aspects of a domain inconsistently (in our case, museum architecture), then the metaphor that takes the lead tends to conceal those distinctive properties that the other metaphor highlights. By extension, thinking of museums in relation to their contents as conduits or as containers has distinct effects to visitors' experience.

In particular, seeing museums as silent containers or as conduits of cultural information conceals the fact that museums are, themselves, cultural artifacts. Museums have a dual identity: both as containers of their own messages and as conduits of institutional ones. By contrast with their contents, museums are elements of heritage that are not *musealised*. Visitors walk, talk, sit, eat, drink, or socialize in them. They engage with museums in multiple ways under their own initiative. Hence, conduit metaphors overlook museums' inherent engaging qualities.

Finally, while conduit metaphors conceal museums' engaging qualities, container metaphors can enhance disengaging ones which are inherent in container-museums. It was previously suggested that transmission metaphors turn museum experience into a gradual encounter with several protective containers (for example, with a showcase, an

exhibition, and with the building). These containers define museums as sophisticated defense mechanisms against loss, destruction, decay and forgetfulness. But, this also shapes them into alienating environments. Container metaphors support conceptualizations of museums as protective structures that encircle artifacts and establish distance between them and the erosive aspects of the outside world. For example, Stephen Weil suggests that the conceptualization of museums as temples has shaped them into treasuries of sacred and endangered contents. These contents are protected not only from acid rain and pollution but also from the “spiritual pollution of the sordid commercial interest” (Weil 1995, 8). Cultural heritage is still preserved in a defensive manner. However, doing so also sets non-negotiable restrictions on visitors’ engagement and fills museums with thick glass cases, barriers, prohibiting signs, security personnel and CCTV cameras. Such environments are fundamentally disengaging and frequently interpreted as physical manifestations of the institution’s lack of trust in its visitors.

Conclusions [H1]

Transmission metaphors, particularly container ones, have been used to promote the preservation and communication of culture as a form of tangible heritage since the inception of the heritage industry. These metaphors have shaped the ways we conceptualise and communicate its intangible elements, and supported the creation of legislative frames around them. Transmission metaphors have also been used to make the case for the preservation of artifacts when the cultural practices that produced them have ceased.

In contemporary museums, conduit and container metaphors exist not just in contrast with one another, but also with an emerging paradigm that challenges their dominance. Contrary to the strict social and behavioral boundaries set by the first generations of patrons and collectors, contemporary museums are vulnerable to— and sometimes invite— visitors’ initiatives. Visitors now enter museums equipped with their smartphones, cameras and music players. They still cross a series of physical and contemplative boundaries upon entry, but they often choose to ignore the museum’s sequence and linearity (Phillips 2013). Visitors frame their own museum experiences and construct their own meanings for themselves. Are transmission metaphors capable of supporting our conceptualization of such unpredictable museum visits? And if not, is it possible to dismiss them and invent new ones?

Reddy suggests that the tacit or extensive employment of a metaphor is an indication of its effectiveness. Trying to discard well-established metaphors from our thoughts, or preventing them from shaping our actions, is extremely difficult— if not impossible. He suggests that if we wish to temporarily break the spell of a metaphor, “We require another story to tell... so that the deeper implications of the metaphor can be drawn out by means of contrast” (Reddy 1979, 292). Building new frameworks around transmission metaphors helps us to acknowledge their negative effects and enhance their positive ones. Current efforts to conceptualize museums as ‘theatres’ (Evans 2013; Rancière 2007; Hughes 1998), as ‘ecosystems’ (Jung 2011), as ‘community networks’ (Giaccardi 2008, 112-131) and as ‘laboratories’ (Weil 1995, 8) work towards this goal. Weil’s laboratory, for example, transforms the museum from container of contemplation to container for experimentation; the metaphor preserves the qualities of a well-defined

container but leaves room for faults and errors. Giaccardi's network metaphor transforms the museum's thick fabric to an entropic membrane; one that encourages the exchange of indoor and outdoor cultural practices rather than their safe containment or exclusion.

Such frameworks embrace the positive qualities bequeathed to museums by transmission metaphors and generate new ones. Standing at the threshold of an unstable but dynamic museum realm, it becomes crucial to reshape the ways in which problems of the museum experience are defined, and use metaphors not as merely figures of a critical and fertile discourse but also as conceptual tools that guide our thoughts and actions.

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END NOTES

1. Translations of specific passages of EDM can be found in *Key Concepts of Museology*, edited by André Desvallées and François Mairesse (ICOM & ICOFOM, 2010).
2. «L'objet n'est la vérité de rien du tout. Polyfonctionnel d'abord, polysémique ensuite, il ne prend de sens que dans un contexte». Translation provided by the author.
3. «Touchant à la mise en valeur du contenant, plutôt que du contenu, la conception

de l'architecture s'attacha donc longtemps à se mettre en valeur elle-même, plus qu'à servir la muséographie et les collections.» Translation provided by the author.

4. «Qu'importe l'ivresse, pourvu qu'on ait le flacon!» Translation provided by the author.

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